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AUTHOR Aber, John
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ABSTRACT

Five college writing teachers who consider themselves critically and politically progressive were interviewed to see how much their political views influenced what they did in their composition classes. The comments of the teachers suggest that although they are very sensitive to the students' needs and go out of their way to accept diverse views in the classroom, they are much more political in the classroom than they give themselves credit for. They may use standard texts in their classes, and they may ask their students to proofread a paper with the aid of a handbook--yet they still seem to focus some of their assignments on the kinds of issues that many in the teaching profession would consider politically charged, such as race, class, and gender. The writing teachers interviewed, however, certainly do not pose any threat to the status quo in their institutions or in their departments. They know it is not wise to alienate their students and colleagues by assuming a radical political stance. Yet these teachers also feel that they are shortchanging their students if they deny them the chance to think and write about the difficult problems that the American culture does not always want to confront. (PRA)

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John Aber
The College of Mount St. Joseph
Mount St. Joseph, OH 45051
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John Aber
The College of Mount St. Joseph
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Political Commitment in the Writing Class: A Look at the Practice of Five Teachers

For the past several years, more and more people concerned with preserving what they often call "traditional educational values" have become alarmed about what they believe is an increasing number of politically radical professors on our nation's campuses. As a result of this alarm, some professors have been singled out and severely punished for their political views. For instance, several years ago an article in the Nation reported that Henry Giroux was denied tenure at Boston University, despite an outstanding publishing record, simply because the president of the university, John Silber, believed his scholarship leaned too far to the left. And some student publications such as the Dartmouth Review regularly single out certain professors for ridicule, especially if they happen to take a multi-cultural or feminist stance in their classrooms. Quite often, course offerings themselves are also attacked because they are not perceived as politically neutral by those who consider themselves guardians of our educational tradition. We need look no further than the University of Texas at Austin to find an example of such attacks. There, a writing course that would have asked students to consider how such things as race, class, and gender influence one's life chances in our country was denounced because, according to the National Association of Scholars, it would have focused on politically charged issues that are inappropriate for a required writing course. As most of us know by now, implementation of this course was postponed, and the committee that recommended the course resigned in protest. The situation in Texas may

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be unusual because it has generated so much publicity. But it does seem to reflect a pervasive fear that has a long history in this country--the fear that America's educational system can somehow be subverted if too many students are asked to consider too many questions concerning the nature of politics and power.

To find out how valid these fears might be, I decided to seek out and interview several college writing teachers who consider themselves politically progressive. My goal was simple: I wanted to know just how much their political views influenced what they did in their composition classes. I do not claim to have found what social scientists would call a random sample of such teachers. I interviewed just five of them. These people certainly could not be considered to be representative of any particular class or kind of writing teacher, at least not according to any analytical-empiricist standard of validity. In other words, the conclusions I have drawn from my research are tentative at best and cannot be generalized to any population of writing teachers as a whole. I did, though, take great care in selecting my respondents, and I did try to find writing teachers who come from different kinds of backgrounds and different kinds of institutions.

First of all, I wanted to talk with those who considered themselves classroom practitioners, rather then composition theorists. Of course, these two categories overlap somewhat. But I reasoned that those whose first allegiance is to the classroom would give me a clearer picture of what goes on there than those who publish extensively but seldom teach more than one or two sections of composition a quarter. With perhaps one exception, I think I succeeded in finding the kinds of practitioners I was looking for. To guard against getting too narrow a view from any one kind of teacher, I decided to

talk with an instructor still struggling to finish her Ph.D. as well as with a tenured professor who helps administer a writing program, and I also made sure I found a teacher from a small liberal arts college as well as one from a major research institution with a doctoral program in rhetoric. After conferring with several writing program administrators from around the country and after asking for help from several friends and acquaintances, I found and interviewed five teachers who fit my criteria and who were willing to identify themselves as critical, politically progressive writing teachers. Critical was the only term that all were willing to use, and that is why I use it here myself. Even though most had read Marxist theory, not all wanted to be identified as Marxists or neo-Marxists. And I found that only two used terms such as radical or liberatory when referring to themselves. It is interesting in itself to note that almost all of these teachers had difficulty describing themselves with some sort of label, a difficulty that others-- especially those who are wary of mixing politics with education-- do not always have.

Before detailing what these teachers had to say about their classroom practice, I want to briefly introduce them one by one. The names, by the way, are fictitious. Not all of them were sure that they wanted their identities known, so I tried to respect their anonymity:

1. I first talked with Barbara, a recent graduate of a well-respected Ph.D. program at a large state university in the midwest. She is in her second year as an assistant professor at a small Catholic college located in a large eastern city. Her usual teaching load is four courses a semester, and at least half of them are writing courses. "I want to give my students a voice," she told me, "and get them off their conservative path."

2. I next talked with Ann, who has taught writing in almost every conceivable kind of institution--from junior high schools to state penitentiaries. Currently, she is an assistant professor at a medium-size university in the midwest. "We aren't even close to being a major research school," she told me. "Many of my students are working-class commuters, and political stuff seldom works with them."

3. Linda was the youngest writing teacher I talked with. She is currently teaching three freshman writing classes every quarter under a short term contract at a large state university. Her Ph.D. is not yet finished, and she finds little time to work on her dissertation because of the number of students she must deal with. "I've read Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, and Karl Marx," she said, "but I'm not sure my teaching is informed by these people. Mostly, I'm just trying to survive."

4. Kathryn was the only senior faculty member I talked with. She is an associate professor at a very large research university where she helps administer the freshman writing program. In this capacity, she helps train new T.A.'s and instructors. Her main scholarly interest lies in literary theory, but she has a keen interest in the critical educational theory of Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz and tries to relate this theory to her teaching of writing. "I'm not sure, though, that my assignments and teaching are as radical as I sound," she said.

5. The last person I interviewed was Jack. He is an instructor at a two-year technical college where he sometimes teaches five courses every quarter, and four of them are often writing classes. In graduate school, he became keenly interested in radical political theory and how it related to teaching reading and writing. "I suppose I'm a Marxist," he said, "but the problem is that I

have a hard time using my politics in class. I guess I'm a little bit afraid I might get fired."

As some of these teachers' comments begin to suggest, those who fear that our educational system is in danger of being subverted by the activities of politically committed professors may have very little to worry about. In fact, one theme that seemed to run through all of my interviews was this: Translating political beliefs into practical classroom strategies can be a very difficult task, entailing some risks that my writing teacher respondents seemed a little hesitant to take. "I try never to make political statements in class unless I'm really pressed by a student," Barbara told me. "Many of my students are studying business and technical fields. I can't tell them what they believe is a lie, even though I might think so myself."

What Barbara said reflects a clear contradiction that I found throughout my series of interviews: These teachers all share a strong commitment to political change, yet they all find it very hard to directly channel this commitment into classroom activities and assignments. And not only do they find it difficult, and perhaps even sometimes unimportant and unnecessary, to politicize the activities in their classrooms, but several of them also have trouble discussing the political nature of their ideas with their colleagues. "I'm scared all the time," Barbara said. "I feel I have to mask my political beliefs. Not many people know about them here at my college. I'm very vulnerable. Almost all of my colleagues are men, tenured men." Ann, who teaches at a much larger institution, feels much the same way as Barbara. "People act liberal here up to a point," Ann said, "but I'm vastly different from my colleagues. I don't even whisper a word about my politics. I'm not stupid. I'm up for tenure before long."

Basically, some of these teachers feel as if they are leading double lives. Jack, the technical college teacher, summed up his dual existence in this way: "With my old friends from graduate school I can be myself and say what I believe, but as soon as I walk on campus, I'm different somehow. I sit in department meetings and say the same things everybody else says, or I say nothing at all. And I then find myself telling my classes to do things that I know aren't raising their political consciousness one iota. That's what bothers me the most."

In the classroom, almost all of these teachers used some kind of standard writing class text published by one of the big commercial publishing houses, a fact that would seem to support the idea that these teachers do not go out of their way to assume a political stance in front of their students. Jack often uses a book by William Coles as a reader, and he also requires his students to buy a traditional handbook. "I ask them to get the Harbrace handbook," he said. "It gives them some security even if they can't always read it and understand it." With her freshmen, Linda uses Re-Reading America, a reader published by Bedford/St. Martin's. "I was handed this and told to use it," she said. "In many ways, I don't like it, but I felt I had to go along. I'm operating under some institutional constraints that I'm not used to." Barbara and Kathryn also use Re-Reading America. And they both seem to like it more than Linda does. "It's not a bad book," Barabara said. "Some of the readings can get some students to reconsider the realities of the American Dream." Another book that was mentioned was the St. Martin's Guide to Writing. "I especially use the section on research papers," Kathryn said. "That's a big part of the course." The only teacher who did not mention a fairly standard text was Ann. Instead of using a text, Ann tried to pick

different kinds of readings and copy them for her classes. "When we talk about race, I've got a thing by Dick Gregory that works fairly well," she said, "and I sometimes use Paul Fussell's essay on social class. It's funny, and the class seems to get into it."

This comment by Ann is telling, for even though none of these teachers viewed themselves as being overtly political in the classroom, almost all encouraged their students to write about themes such as race, class, and gender. But they tried to nurture such writing in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way. "Class issues are difficult for my students," Kathryn said. "Sometimes, though, they break through to an insight that surprises. I don't push it, though. I like the protection of a text between my students and me. There are certain risks I don't take." Ann echoed Kathryn's feelings when she talked about what she called confrontational teaching: "I'd like to go in and play a confrontational role, tell my students that their middle-class brains are full of mush. But I've tried it, and it doesn't work. It makes students too uneasy." Linda, too, backs away from directly confronting her students with issues that make them uncomfortable. "I want to talk about political issues," she said, "and I encourage them to formulate arguments about things such as poverty and race. But students feel so self-conscious about all this, and I don't push it." Jack seemed the most frustrated in discussing how he poses writing assignments that ask for critical reflection about issues such as class. "In all my seven years at the college, only one or two students ever really examined how work in this country is dead-end and unfulfilling for most people," he said. "I haven't given up entirely, but I can't ask them to critically examine what they simply don't want to see." On the other hand, perhaps Barbara expressed the most hope that her

assignments might raise her students political consciousness. "Given enough freedom to explore issues they care about, some students become almost naturally critical of their culture," she said. "The problem lies in getting them to believe the freedom you're giving them won't be taken away. I haven't discovered how to do that consistently yet, so a lot of students don't take advantage of the freedom I give them."

Of course, my respondents had much more to say than I have had time to detail here. But if what we have heard so far is any indication, it appears that these teachers are much more political in their teaching than they give themselves credit for. They may use standard texts in their classes, and they may ask their students to proofread a paper with the aid of a handbook--yet they still seem to focus some of their assignments on the kinds of issues that many in our profession would consider politically charged. Writing class certainly does not have to be confrontational to be considered political, although several of my respondents seemed to think so as they described themselves, sometimes almost apologetically, as not being political enough in their classes. Perhaps we are left, then, with another contradiction. The writing teachers I interviewed certainly do not pose any threat to the status quo in their institutions or in their departments. They know it is not wise to alienate their students and their colleagues by assuming a radical political stance. "I'm a writing teacher first," one of them said. "Politics is important, but not at the expense of denying my students a chance to succeed in their other academic work. We work at learning to play the game, whether we totally believe in it or not." Yet these teachers also know that they are shortchanging their students if they deny them the chance to think and write

about the difficult problems that our culture does not always want to confront.

The tension that results from such contradictions may not always be easy to live with. But those who live without it may not be in such an enviable position either, at least not according to Linda who wondered about those who opposed the new writing course in Austin. "All teaching is political in a very real sense," she said. "What do these people expect students to write about if not the critical issues that face us? It must get awfully boring if you ignore this stuff."

As for the original question I asked at when I first started my research, I found that there is no simple answer to it. On the one hand, it appears that those who are critical, politically progressive teachers are very sensitive to their students' needs and go out of their way to accept diverse views in their classes. So in a way, the answer is no. Those who oppose the radical teachers in our midst have nothing at all to fear from them. On the other hand, though, such teachers do harbor hope that their students will begin to see the inequities and injustice that are all too prevalent in our country. So in a way the answer is yes. There is a chance that some students will change their political views through writing and reflection. But for now, I lean toward the negative answer, at least when considering what Jack said about his identity as a teacher and the identities of his friends who also teach English: "We're members of a conservative profession. We all liked school, liked the way it was, or we wouldn't still be in school, would we? And our identities as members of this profession are far stronger in than our identities as radical teachers who'd like to change the world. That's just the way things are in a country that tries to deny the existence of politics."